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# Aquino Must Address Filipinos' Poverty

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**T**hree decades ago, the United States launched one of its first counterinsurgency wars, in the Philippines. The "enemy" was the Huks, an army of peasants with legitimate grievances and a Communist ideology. This covert campaign, a combination of paramilitary operations and political reforms, was probably America's most successful counterinsurgency war.

Today, even as covert operations in Central America are being scrutinized by Congress and by a special prosecutor, President Reagan has reportedly signed another "finding," authorizing increased covert activity by the Central Intelligence Agency in the Philippines. A considerable number of United States military officers have arrived for duty in Manila, direct from their experience with counterinsurgencies in Central America.

The enemy in the Philippines is again the Communists; but this time the United States might not be successful, at least not unless President Corazon C. Aquino shows a greater willingness to address the issues of economic disparity and the power of the elite that the Communists are exploiting to gain adherents.

It may seem surprising that President Aquino, widely portrayed as a nationalist and committed to reform, has turned to the C.I.A. and the Pentagon, even criticizing the latter for not providing more assistance. But she has welcomed the Americans rather than take on the Philippine elite.

Back in December 1985, when Mrs. Aquino was beginning her campaign against Ferdinand E. Marcos, a Filipino journalist who was staunchly anti-Marcos said that even if Mrs. Aquino became President she would not be likely to enact the programs that he and other moderates, as well as some liberals and leftists, felt were necessary. "She would have to go against her friends and her class," he said.

He was right, and Mrs. Aquino, a member of one of the country's wealthiest clans, has been unwilling so far to alienate them.

In a country where at least two-thirds of the population lives in rural poverty, a land redistribution program would be the most visible demonstration that Mrs. Aquino is committed to a more economically just society. Yet, for more than a year, President Aquino has squandered her authority, moral and legal,

to implement land reform.

At a minimum, she could have set an example by agreeing to turn over a small portion of her own family's 12,000-acre farm, Hacienda Lusita, to peasant workers. But she hasn't even done that. Indeed, she once said that the farm workers at Lusita, who toil in the blistering sun for a few dollars a day, were better off than a peasant who owned his own plot, a statement that startled diplomats in the United States Embassy in Manila.

Mrs. Aquino's failure to root out corruption has also caused concern among many Filipinos. In a recent cover story, the Far Eastern Economic Review recounted charges of cronyism, nepotism and corruption in the Aquino administration. A disturbing article, it is instructive for those whose sharply critical views of Mr. Marcos have been replaced by a faithful embrace of Mrs. Aquino. Her personal probity may be beyond reproach, but she has not demanded the same high standards of others.

Illustrative of her lax approach to malfeasance is the case of Ernesto Maceda, who had once been an operative for Mr. Marcos. In the 1989 Presidential election, he flew around the country in an air force plane distributing envelopes filled with pesos to mayors and local political captains.

Despite objections from her close advisers, Mrs. Aquino appointed Mr. Maceda to a Cabinet position, dismissing him only when charges of corruption in his agency could no longer be ignored. But she then put Mr. Maceda on her slate of senatorial candidates, and he was expected to win a seat (though the official results won't be known for several days).

President Aquino is often compared favorably with President Raúl Alfonsín of Argentina. However, unlike Mr. Alfonsín, who has acted decisively to help restore democracy in his country, Mrs. Aquino has not taken actions against military officers responsible for torture, killings and other human rights abuses during the Marcos years.

The February 1986 ouster of Mr. Marcos has been termed a "revolution." But it wasn't. It was an uprising that resulted in the defeat of a corrupt dictator but not in any alteration of the economic and political structure. A revolution in the Philippines still seems inevitable. It can be a peaceful, democratic one, or it can be a Communist one.

Gen. Edward G. Lansdale, who led the counterinsurgency against the Huks in the 1950's, noted at the time that the Philippines had "a Government of the privileged few, not of the people." In the mid-1960's, the C.I.A., in a secret national intelligence estimate, observed that the Philippines

was beset by "land hunger in the countryside; unemployment in the cities; and a grinding poverty for the overwhelming majority of the people." Without a program to address "basic domestic socio-economic problems," the agency stated, "nationalism and discontent are likely to lend themselves to leftist exploitation."

We have no evidence today that these warnings have been heeded or that the lessons of Vietnam — that covert and military operations alone cannot defeat the Communists — have been learned. □

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